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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 COLOMBO 000818

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STATE FOR SA/INS
USPCOM FOR FPA

E.O. 12958: DECL: 05/01/2015

TAGS: PHUM KIRF PGOV CE

SUBJECT: SRI LANKA: BUDDHIST RELIGIOUS PARTY TRYING
ANTI-CONVERSION BILL AGAIN

REF: A. COLOMBO 787

B. COLOMBO 742

C. 04 COLOMBO 1895

Classified By: CDA JAMES F. ENTWISTLE. REASON: 1.4 (B,D).

SUMMARY

1. (SBU) The Jathika Hela Urumaya (JHU), a Buddhist religious party whose 7 MPs are monks, is pressing ahead with a bill to outlaw "unethical" conversions, which it expects to come before Parliament on May 6. According to JHU MPs, the influx of Christian missionaries, under the guise of NGOs providing tsunami relief, makes the need for such legislation more urgent than ever. The monks' push coincides with a May 1 attack on a Christian church in the southern district of Galle. The monks' verbal assault on NGOs is finding common cause with efforts, spearheaded by the pro-Marxist Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP), to "investigate" the activities of NGOs providing tsunami aid. Riven with its own internal organizational problems, the JHU is unlikely to give up the single issue it believes defines it. End summary.

LAW TO PROMOTE "RELIGIOUS HARMONY"?

2. (SBU) On April 27 poloff met with Jathika Hela Urumaya (JHU) MPs Ven. Athureliye Ratana Thero and Ven. Omalpe Sobitha Thero, who were accompanied by H.M.G.B. Kotakadeniya, a retired Deputy Inspector General of Police and current Deputy Secretary of the JHU. Ven. Ratana, the JHU Parliamentary group leader, and Ven. Sobitha, JHU deputy leader, are two of seven monk MPs still affiliated with the party. (Note: Two other JHU monk MPs have crossed the aisle to vote with the Government.) The MPs had requested the meeting in order to exchange views on anti-conversion legislation.

3. (SBU) Ven. Ratana said that the JHU-sponsored anti-conversion bill is scheduled to be introduced in Parliament on May 6. The JHU had amended parts of an earlier draft of the bill that the Supreme Court had ruled were unconstitutional (Ref C), Ven. Sobitha reported. In particular, the revised bill has dropped an earlier requirement that converts register with local government authorities, as well as a provision allowing the police to investigate allegations of "unethical" conversion without the approval of the Attorney General. With these revisions made, the two monks expressed confidence that the bill would pass. Its passage had been made more urgent by the influx of Christian missionaries, masquerading as NGO workers, who had come into Sri Lanka after the tsunami, the trio alleged. Many of these NGOs were passing out Bibles along with aid packets, they declared.

4. (SBU) When asked how many Buddhists had been lost to "unethical" conversion during the past year, Ven. Sobitha replied, "Thousands." When asked for details to back up this claim, he could not provide any, acknowledging that none of the converts themselves had come forward to report having been coerced or hoodwinked into changing their religion. Most of the evidence the JHU has gathered comes from other concerned parties, he said. He proceeded to recount oft-told tales of Christians handing out Buddha-shaped cookies, forcing converts to desecrate Buddhist images, etc. When asked for specifics of such occurrences, he reported that a Catholic church in the southern district of Matara had videotaped two little girls dancing on the head of a Buddha image. He undertook to supply details of the date and place of the incident. (Note: When we checked with local authorities in Matara, they were completely unaware of the incident and expressed some doubt that the Catholic church--which has been in the district for more than a century--would engage in such activity.)

5. (SBU) Poloff expressed concern that attempts to pass anti-conversion legislation could undermine Sri Lanka's long tradition of religious tolerance, diversity and harmony.

That tolerance is perceived as a weakness and is exploited by unscrupulous Christian missionaries, Ven. Sobitha rejoined. People are so resentful of these missionaries' activities that legislation is needed to mollify popular ire and avert possible communal violence in the future, he claimed. Viewed in this light, he argued, anti-conversion legislation is thus actually aimed at protecting religious harmony. Poloff disagreed, noting that religion had not been a factor in violent ethnic and ideological upheavals Sri Lanka has experienced over the past 25 years. Instead, the good relations among members of different religious communities in Sri Lanka had provided an example to other nations in the region. Anti-conversion legislation could provoke whatever latent tensions might exist; the U.S. has urged--and will continue to urge--political parties not to support this legislation, she concluded. The JHU trio dissented vociferously with this view, with Kotakadeniya, in particular, making several fantastic claims. First, he disputed that Sri Lanka had experienced any ethnic tension over the past few decades. The communal riots of 1983 were politically motivated, he alleged, and included many instances of Tamils killing other Tamils. Second, he charged, Christian churches are linked to the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE), and conversions are part of a plot to wear down Sinhalese Buddhist resistance to a separate Tamil state. (Note: The two monks said they did not share this last view, characterizing it as Kotakadeniya's "special" theory. They did not, however, challenge his revisionist version of the ethnic conflict.)

CHURCH ATTACK

16. (SBU) According to the National Christian Fellowship of Sri Lanka (NCFSL), a gang led by a local Buddhist monk attacked the pastor's wife and parishioners at Zion Prayer Center in Balapitiya, Galle District, on May 1. The pastor's wife reportedly had to be hospitalized after being kicked in the groin; a pregnant woman present at the center at the time of the attack was also assaulted. A United National Party (UNP) member of the Pradeshiya Sabha (local elected council) also participated in the attack, NCFSL reported.

17. (C) Complaints have been filed with local police authorities, according to Nayomini Weerasooriya of NCFSL, but she fears "they are dragging their feet" out of reluctance to arrest a Buddhist cleric. Her organization has also raised the matter with UNP Chief Opposition Whip Mahinda Samarasinghe, who promised to look into allegations of the local UNP leader's participation in the attack. Weerasooriya attributed the attack to local disgruntlement at tsunami aid activities carried out by the church.

18. (SBU) The Superintendent of Police (SP) for Balapitiya told us on May 2 that the confrontation began when local villagers asked church members to stop a prayer service on May 1 out of respect for a local monk who had been cremated the day before. When the pastor refused to stop the service, the villagers, accompanied by some monks, became angry. According to the police, the pastor's wife was injured in a fall after being "pushed away by some villagers." The UNP Pradeshiya Sabha member was not at the scene, police said. After conducting an impartial investigation, the SP said he had found no evidence of assault.

COMMENT

19. (C) The JHU made its way into Parliament last year by claiming to safeguard the unique cultural heritage/existence of Sinhalese Buddhists. Beset by its own internal problems, the JHU is now in danger of disintegrating and needs the specter of "unethical" conversions to ensure its political identity. The influx of money and foreigners into Sri Lanka in the aftermath of the tsunami may inadvertently help fuel the xenophobic, somewhat paranoid undercurrents that feed the anti-conversion movement. The JHU can be expected to try to capitalize on inevitable feelings of dissatisfaction with tsunami aid distribution by depicting NGO activities as part

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of a Christian plot. Unfortunately, the JHU may find common cause with recent Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP) posturing against NGOs' "hidden agenda" in tsunami work (septel). We will continue to urge the political leadership not to support anti-conversion legislation.

ENTWISTLE